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ABSTRACT

The author conducted a year-long study of his own fifth-grade classroom as a teacher-researcher. The intent was to create a theme study classroom, organizing curriculum around the problems, needs, and interests of students through interdisciplinary investigations of themes. Using action research, implementation processes and constraints were investigated from a teacher's perspective. An inquiry was conducted into the meanings of theme study from a teacher's perspective. He inquired into the meanings of theme study developed by students and the teacher, and explored the resulting conceptions of knowledge revealed in student actions and teacher reflection. The year began by exploring the theme "Why are we here?" The second semester themes were "exploring the unknown," "taking off on investigations," and "greed and charity." As the year progressed, students became more able to carry on an instructional conversation that moved back and forth from school study to the events in the world around them. The author's definitions of theme study evolved as the curriculum was enacted. The stance of the students toward knowledge became a primary concern as they moved from a passive relationship with knowledge to an active and communal approach. Insights from this classroom should be useful for those studying both curriculum and theory as it raises questions of the teacher's and students' relationships to knowledge. Three figures illustrate the discussion. (SLD)

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Integrating Instruction around Themes: Knowledge Construction in an Elementary Classroom

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I recently completed a year-long study of my own classroom as a teacher-researcher. Studying my own practice, I intended to create a theme study classroom, organizing curriculum around the problems, needs, and interests of the students through interdisciplinary investigations of themes. Using action research, I investigated implementation processes and constraints from a teacher's perspective. I inquired into the meanings of theme study developed by both students and teacher. Finally, I explored the resulting conceptions of knowledge revealed in student actions and teacher reflections.

Integrating Instruction through Themes

Integrating instruction through themes brings together the long tradition of project-based curricula with an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. An interdisciplinary approach emphasizes the connectedness of knowledge, applying methods and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme (Boyer, 1985; Dewey, 1916; Jacobs, 1989). A project-based curricula allows students involvement in solving broad problems of interest in several fields (Dewey, 1931; Kilpatrick, 1918; Kliebard, 1986).

Renewed interest in the thematic organization of curriculum has surfaced as part of developments in the cognitive science and whole language movements. The cognitive apprenticeship model emphasizes learning in terms of the context of knowledge use in solving problems and carrying out tasks (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Ann Brown's work (Brown, 1990; Brown & Campione, in press) has tied the development of an intentional learning environment to a theme-based curriculum where students develop a culture of learning in the classroom. Teaching practices in a community of learning were marked by: curricula organized around themes; cooperative learning; expertise distributed among students and teacher; and students as apprentice learners, gaining research skills (Brown & Campione, in press; Brown, 1990). The whole language movement builds on this cognitive science base (Edelsky, 1990; Willinsky, 1990), emphasizing units of study as focal points for inquiry, involving students in planning and giving them choices of authentic activities (Goodman, 1986).

Theme study could effect structural change if it involves a change in conceptions of knowledge, from knowledge as transmitted whole, to knowledge as: generated by the social relations within a community (Vygotsky, 1978); a process of exploring problems through many perspectives (Wigginton, 1985); constructed by reciprocal negotiation between the learner and the environment (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988); connected to the interests of the learner (Dewey, 1916); inexorably linked to personal experience (Treichler, 1986); and purposeful in pointing toward action and revealing larger relations in society (Apple, 1990; Young, 1971). It was with these conceptions of knowledge in mind that I began the process of constructing and enacting curricula in my fifth grade classroom.

Action Research

I chose phenomenological action research as a method to study my practice. Action research involves systematic inquiry teachers do to understand and improve their own practice (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990). I was researcher as teacher as researcher, returning to the elementary classroom after two years as a graduate student. I followed Kemmis and McTaggart's (1982) action research cycle through the moments of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. My interest was distinctly qualitative and phenomenological: not to reduce what I was doing, but to reveal the essential meanings of theme study as it was experienced in my classroom (Van Manen, 1990). Thus my research is the story of my practice, enacted through my reflectiveness on my life-world (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1988). I took the role of observant participant, both recording and reflecting on my practice through journals, video and audio taping, and document analysis. I then proceeded to painstakingly reconstruct the year, re-reading, recording, summarizing, and analyzing the data collected. Writing is the final act, distancing myself while at the same time drawing me in closer to my experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

Evolution of the Curriculum

In my classroom practice, several essential aspects of theme study evolved. Curriculum construction involves making selections from our culture to influence teaching in the classroom. My selections responded to contextual limits I perceived within the institution of schooling. State-defined expectations for what fifth-graders study, along with my own ten-year history of knowing fifth-grade curriculum, both limited and directed my choices. Thus, social studies was defined by the expected national curriculum of American history for fifth grade. Science topics derived from my own experiences teaching fifth grade, which were strongly influenced by textbook scope and sequence delinations. Mathematics was almost totally controlled by what standard fifth-grade textbooks covered. Language Arts was more maleable, responding to other curricula and areas I felt comfortable in teaching.

Subject areas played a large role in defining the theme in which they would be incorporated. The themes which I devised needed to fit the content to which I had committed myself. Thus, I created a broad theme as we approached a particular study, attempting to balance the various aspects of the curriculum under a rubric which could embody the diverse disciplinary studies I had previously delineated (see Figure 1). This resulted in creating pairings which were sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to integrate with each other.

The tendency to have disciplines define the content of schooling is longstanding (Dewey, 1931). School knowledge is generally socially defined by its separateness from everyday life (McNeil, 1986). Subject matter is defined and approved for us by society, the typical solutions and precepts which arbitrarily differentiate the world (Esland, 1971). I was aware of this tendency of the disciplines to define the nature of knowledge. However, I was also aware of the expectations of the parents, students, administration, and state for a prescribed curricula to be taught. Within this dilemma, I attempted to create themes that would relate to preexisting content

domains while freeing us to move beyond toward connections both to other disciplines and to students' lives.

My curriculum was far from set, but more a process of growth. In creating themes which could serve as a lens through which to examine different content areas, I attempted to respond to both the needs of the disciplinary areas and the needs of the students. Each theme I designed moved closer to the ideal of disclosing fundamental patterns (Perkins, 1989). Yet, for themes to apply both broadly across a range of topic areas and pervasively within topics, themes needed to be flexibly interpreted by myself and the students. It was exactly this flexibility, allowing the evolution of the theme, which gave the theme its power to reveal connections across the curriculum.

We began the year exploring the theme "Why are we here?", tying together study of geography, geology, and self-understanding as a means to understand our place in the world. Each of the component aspects developed in somewhat separate directions, defined more by the materials and subject specificity than by the interests of the children. Our geology studies progressed through group work aimed at establishing learning and teaching groups. Geography revolved around a simulation involving group decision-making skills. Our literature studies, using Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1977), moved us to probe our understandings of differences between students and our own approaches to each other. As we moved into research and reading about Native Americans, understanding differences emerged as key points of discussion. The clash of cultures between Europeans and Native Americans provided a backdrop for exploring our own feelings about those different from us.

Our second semester found us "Exploring the Unknown", as we studied the early exploration of America along with an indepth study of astronomy. "Taking off on Investigations" followed, uniting our study of the westward movement and pioneer life with investigations into the nature of heat. We concluded the year by looking at "Greed and Charity", combining studies of slavery, the Civil War, and business math. A larger theme emerged as our studies progressed, unifying all our studies as involved in exploring stereotypes.

> I get excited reading our literature book, excited over the larger theme I see coming out of that book: the tendency of people to create enemies, to typecast people, basically the roots of racism. This theme has run through the entire year, although I have not always seen it in the literature we've read. But it was there, under the surface, sometimes picked up in our reading discussions, sometimes in a question asked on the response sheets, sometimes in discussions about our social studies. It is something I could have made much more apparent, yet am only now coming to realize was there the whole time. I've looked more at the outer manifestations, the explorations and why themes, and even those were not often brought enough to the surface. (Teacher Journal, 3/28/92)

The use of broad themes allowed the students and me to respond flexibly to the content and the materials of our studies. It provided a useful schema within which to place our studies, allowing understanding to be built through connections to our experiences and our other studies. Through our studies, and especially through discussion, these larger themes were

revealed as powerful in understanding the world around us. As students delineated research directions, as they explored their own experiences through writing, and as our discussions tied their own experiences with the experiences of those we studied and read about, the theme became the link between the world of school study and the lives of the students.

Powerful Themes

It was in literature that the year theme revealed itself. Literature has the power to touch these basic human ideas, the moral imagination of humanity (Cole, 1989). I found myself focusing on the "sense of moral and intellectual purpose" (Postman, 1989, p.122) provided in the literature which we were reading. Through the stories we were reading, and the stories we were telling from our own lives in relating to the stories we read, the facts of science and social studies assumed meaning.

Within our own classroom, class meetings often focused on understanding differences between others. An emphasis was placed on listening to the viewpoints of those different from you, and acknowledging the similarities along with the differences. Explorer studies emphasized the views of explorers about the lands and peoples they explored. Classroom debates defined "discovery" through its impact on native peoples. A simulation of pioneer life emphasized an understanding of human nature and the hard decisions people then had to make. Our Civil War studies tried to understand the conditions of African-Americans along with the viewpoints of white Americans at the time.

These were "big ideas" exactly because they touched our own experiences. "Human beings require stories to give meaning to the facts of their existance" (Postman, 1989, p. 122). Literature began to be seen as a way to make sense of the world. It was not just the world of long-ago, as related to our social studies themes. By continually relating back to the experiences of the children, the literature became a focal point for discussion to understand the interaction of our studies with students' lives. These were powerful ideas thus tied to student experience.

> In a way, the choices of literature and content create the themes more than even the conscious choices I make as a teacher. Thus the deadliness of textbooks, where the themes are purposefully amorphous and whitewashed, purposefully disconnected. The power to create my own curriculum, although somewhat circumscribed by the state and national curriculum, has allowed me to see into the materials we use, to get excited about what I deem important in the reading and in the studies we do. Because I make up the questions, because I read and analyze and think through for myself, it is my choices which are able to become the curriculum. If it only wasn't so much damn work! I want that power, but I don't always want the responsibility it creates. Give me a text, I often moan, so I can sit back for a moment, not have to do everything, think everything through. Escape from freedom comes through, for freedom is work. I've only used one literature book this year that I've used before. That has forced me to review all the other books myself, really re-see what was in the books and get excited about the issues I saw coming from them. (Teacher Journal, 3/28/92)

I was struggling with my meaning of a theme study classroom. Truly seizing the power to create curriculum with the children meant both allowing the children to experience the materials of instruction in their own ways, and forcing my "teacher" self to seize the opportunity to go where the children lead me. When I could do that, it allowed us to reveal the deep issues which the literature revealed in ourselves. The classroom became at those times a place where learning was about problem-posing rather than answer-giving. The personal becomes a key aspect of this problem-posing approach. Knowledge must be tied to student's own experience if understanding is to be our goal. Knowledge is never acquired passively (Von Glaserfeld, 1989). Understanding is not passively receiving but actively building up.

> The most interesting part of the discussion for me was discussing the view pioneers had of Indians then. I asked for their opinions, challenging them to think of why pioneers made Indians into such bad guys. The kids came up with the clash over land, the differences in cultures, the fears of the pioneers. I introduced the idea of creating an enemy, and related it to how Sadaam Hussein was portrayed in the Iraqi war. I'm not sure they exactly bought it, but they were interested and seemed to be thinking about the parallels. This is an area that will be reoccuring in the book and demands much more attention. Racism and fears of people different from you needs to be a theme of the book which I give much time to. (Teacher Journal, 2/29/92)

Themes allowed these "big ideas" to surface, a metaconceptual bonus allowing the students to see beyond the content materials into connections to life experiences. Students could then go beyond the materials to the knowledge itself, exploring, judging, and balancing their developing knowledge. Discovery, exploration, and investigation became both topics of discussion and methodologies. Knowledge was viewed as connected to the self both personally and intellectually. Exploring stereotypes, revealing itself as a year theme in the materials and discussions of our studies, was as much an exploration of humankind as it was an exploration of one's own self. In looking at how Europeans stereotyped Native Americans, we looked as well within ourselves and the stereotypes we held of various peoples. Our own efforts to balance greed and charity were the basis for viewing the motivations of those involved in slavery.

> I like how the discussions can wander off the book into areas of the kids' interests, like how a discussion about the prices of books somehow ended up talking about the cost of medical care in America today. It seems an important thing to be able to do, so much more than the students just being able to summarize the book and answer questions. The ideas in books need to be the jumping off points for ideas in kid's heads. ... It brings it closer to the type of book discussions adults would have, not focused on picayune little details of the text but on the big ideas. That is why ultimately we all read the same book. (Teacher Journal, 4/12/92).

Themes were constantly being redefined by the experiences of the students and the content of the materials we studied. My choices of instructional materials, especially literature and simulations, seemed pivotal in determining how themes would be interpreted. Literature added a very human face to the theme, prompting us to interpret the theme in terms of our own experiences and our relationship to story. A flexible relationship with the theme was essential, as

content redefined the theme and the theme redefined content. Viewing content through the lens of the theme allowed us the perspective to delineate the powerful, crosscutting ideas existent within the content yet hidden by the vaneer of disciplinary knowledge.

Student Involvement

Students were included in decisions and choices in both the planning and the enactment of the curriculum. In groups, students brainstormed their prior knowledge and directions for inquiry. They then became researchers, empowered to make decisions about their learning within a social situation directed at reflecting on their research and group processes. Students created texts, taught to their peers, and expressed their knowledge through various projects. A classroom environment existed where learning was a socially shared activity, given specific purpose, tied to their experience, and oriented toward becoming an expert. Modifications throughout the year allowed me to experiment with different ways to enact theme study in the classroom.

Student involvement in research was a key aspect of my conception of a theme study classroom. Through student research, students could become active stakeholders in the teaching/learning process. My goal became how to share the decision-making process with them while maintaining general leadership of the curricula process. Thus we negotiated the development of our research projects. At first, I created the forms. Later, I began to share the power of decision making in curriculum. Sharing that power also involved sharing the responsibility, something some students were hesitant to accept.

> Jennifer: You're a teacher, you're supposed to know.
> Student: Yeah, we don't know.
> Teacher: Yes, I have a little more experience than you do, but you have 6 years of experience.
> Student: You have a lot more! You have 42.
> Teacher: . . . So it sounds like you don't have any great ideas about this, do you?
> Student: I do! Read books!
> Student: Go to the library
> Student: Read an encyclopedia
> Student: Watch a movie
> Student: Play games (Videotape transcription, 1/14/92)

As the year progressed, students became more comfortable negotiating with me their approach to learning. They began to readily take the role of making decisions for themselves for the direction of their study, within structures I established for them.

> Teacher: All-right, so, slavery and the Civil War. What I wanted to start out with today is finding out what type of things you want to find out about slavery and the civil war. ...
> Student: I don't know anything about the Civil War.
> Student: I know some things ...

Teacher: OK, that's why today I'm not going to ask you what you already know. ... So there's a couple of different areas within the civil war study. (Writes categories on chalkboard).
Katie: There was nothing left in the southern part of Georgia ...
Teacher: You certainly get that feeling in Georgia, because of Sherman's march. So write slavery on your paper as the first thing. I think we'll do a brainstorm, where people write what type of things they want to find out about and what things they hear from others that sound interesting too. ...
Ted: How much did they cost?
Mark: Who was in charge of the selling?
Student: Didn't people sell their own?
Teacher: Well, wasn't there a building here for selling slaves?
Student: Why were most slaves black?
Teacher: That's a good question. Why was it black people that were slaves?
Mark: Because they were brought from Africa, and they thought white people were better.
Teacher: Why didn't they use Indians? They wouldn't have to bring them so far. ...
(Videotape transcription, 4/8/92)

Student interest moved us on, along with the questions I added to their queries. As they became interested, my questions became a fertile ground for them to add their own questions. I then gave them the power to make their own choices, and the freedom to work individually or in small groups researching questions they found of interest.

Friday also found me asking the kids how we will study the civil war. I was surprised at the openness of their response. They seemed to jump at the opportunity to research the various questions we generated last week, enthusiastically choosing areas and work partners and even wanting to not limit their areas too much. (Teacher Journal, 4/25/92)

I strove to continue to negotiate my own and students' roles in our classroom. I was not content with students as learners and myself as teacher. I pushed the students to learn for the purpose of sharing their knowledge. Each research opportunity became an opportunity for students to teach each other. Each one also became a chance for me to experiment with different arrangements of the learning and teaching process (see Figure 2). I moved between group and individual responsibilities, balancing individual accountability with group interaction. We used different structures for organizing our research knowledge, moving from making charts to creating books to allowing free-form notes.

Throughout the year, students were assigned the role of presenters. They were the experts standing in front of the class, sharing their new-found knowledge in an atmosphere of open inquiry. Those listening to the presentation were encouraged to clarify, question, and connect to their own experiences. The discussion during and after the presentation provided a non-threatening environment where ideas were encouraged rather than judged. As teacher, I could lead and organize the questioning, modelling critical inquiry into the ideas presented. Students became critical questioners, tying the knowledge shared to their own interests and experiences.

> We finished up our astronomy poster presentations. They really went very well. Each one was slightly different, yet there was an obvious commitment of each kid to share the knowledge they gained, as well as good participation of the class in discussing and evaluating that knowledge. I was active in that questioning and exploration, keeping the class involved in exploring and analyzing their understanding of the knowledge shared. So when Nate told us of the high temperatures on Venus, I questioned why they were so high Nate mentioned the many clouds. We looked again at what those clouds were, mostly carbon dioxide. What is carbon dioxide? Various kids mentioned breathing, trees, and plants. Someone mentioned the ozone and heating of earth. So I pushed further into the greenhouse effect and global warming. Many had heard about these and were concerned How was it related to Venus and carbon dioxide clouds? So we discussed pollution, deforestation, and global warming, and connected it to Venus. Someone brought up the possibility of trees on Venus, and we discussed trees changing Venus' atmosphere to more oxygen. ... Nate's father mentioned that Nate came home full of excitement at sharing the discussion over Venus' atmosphere and global warming. (Teacher Journal, 1/26/92)

The class was participating broadly in inquiry, questioning the information collected by our experts in a way that allowed students to make connections to their own experience. We were involved in the transformation of information into knowledge, creating through process a personal, active stance on knowing. The group aided each other in the process, together constructing knowledge in an atmosphere consistent with a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The difference between a child's actual developmental level and their potential for development, as determined through problem solving in collaboration with others, is what Vygotsky termed the zone of proximal development. Students are ready for that construction process when they perceive they have a stake in the knowledge constructed.

The structure of the presentations, with students recording individually, facilitated initiating a climate of inquiry. Their notes allowed the students to establish some initial understandings, a base from which they could then pursue questions of interest to them. The notes also became the product that wrapped up the unit, the "portfolio" piece that illustrated their interaction with the information we explored. Together with my modeling and stimulating questioning, I felt the class was truly getting close to creating a culture of learning, where the interest of all was focused on pursuing and understanding knowledge.

Knowledge Construction

Students and teacher together developed knowledge in the classroom. Process and critical thinking were emphasized over product. In the interdependence of social activity within the classroom, the students could construct their own meanings within a supportive scaffolding of our joint construction of knowledge. Instructional conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) were created and supported in multiple contexts, allowing students to be partners in the exploration of knowledge. An instructional conversation occurs when social interaction assumes the learner has something to say beyond answers. It involves discussion where the student's viewpoint is heard and respected, acknowledged as an integral component of the direction of study.

The process of becoming stakeholders in the instructional conversation occurs at the confluence of teacher's and students' stances toward knowledge. Learning involves teachers and students as nested knowers (Lyons, 1990), influencing and being influenced by each other's way of knowing. I came to see our stance toward knowledge as the key ingredient defining theme study in my classroom. I came to understand the dilemmas within my own understandings of knowledge while I nudged the students toward new stances toward knowledge.

Teacher's Stance Toward Knowledge

Teacher and students hold various positions toward knowledge and ways of knowing (see Figure 3). The teacher's epistemological perspectives can be conceived as including his/her stance towards self as knower, the student as knower and learner, and knowledge of subject matter (Lyons, 1990). My perspective on knowledge had changed considerably during my time as a graduate student. While I had previously been committed to knowledge acquisition as an active process, I saw knowledge as something that passed whole from teacher to student. As a graduate student, I came to understand knowledge as a process constructed and sustained by interactions between and among people. I realized knowledge was a part of an individual's perspective, not separate from the self. Approaching teaching again, I wanted to create a classroom where knowledge would be jointly constructed between students and teacher, where students would view knowledge as process, inseparable from their stake in it. These were my explicit assumptions about knowledge, but old patterns and beliefs were lingering within me, identified in implicit actions I took as a teacher. Falling into routines and acquiescing to institutional constraints revealed conflicts between my beliefs and my actions. Throughout the year I struggled with the contradictions between my convictions and my actions. This argument between opposing tendencies within myself (Lampert, 1985) also created the space to explore how knowledge was constructed in my classroom.

The teacher's stance toward the student as a knower and learner involves assessing the student's stance toward knowledge, identifying goals for students as knowers, and assessing forms of knowing promoted in the classroom (Lyons, 1990). My goal was to give voice to students as knowers, empower them to actively create their own knowledge through reciprocal negotiation with people and materials. Process, not product, was emphasized, as I verbalized repeatedly in math problem solving groups every day. I wanted to bring all the children to a constructivist perspective, lessening the dichotomy for them between learning in and out of school (Resnick, 1987). To that end, I created a classroom where students and teacher together developed knowledge in the classroom. Consistency was difficult to maintain, however, as some parts of my enacted curriculum reverted to presenting knowledge as truths. My background, the institution, and society impinged insidiously upon my teaching to undermine the best of my intentions.

My stance towards knowledge of subject matter and how it is taught depends not only on my own epistemological perspectives, but also on institutional and societal demands on the form of knowledge (Popkewitz, 1988). The school and the community of parents were more concerned for accountability than process. My need to continually justify my position encouraged reflection but also doubts. I knew what I was doing was right, but I was unsure it was worth the risk as a teacher. Parents wanted to know how their children would do in school next year, if they

were learning enough of the "right" material. Our society defines school knowledge as abstract, isolated, easily-categorized bits, remote from everyday life (Young, 1971). Standardized achievement tests given at the end of the school year confirmed this view of knowledge within a school supposedly oriented otherwise. The control function of school is another aspect antagonistic to a constructivist view of knowledge (Kliebard, 1989). Liberating students from the artificial controls of traditional schooling meant dealing with the dilemmas of students' new-found freedom. This was not a process supported by the school, but instead was seen as destructive to an institution very concerned with its outward image.

It was exceedingly difficult for me to break out of societal and institutional definitions of subject matter. I wanted to see subject matter as the ripe fruitage of experience instead of the infallible wisdom usually depicted (Dewey, 1916). Disciplinary knowledge is too often taken-for-granted mystifications which arbitrarily differentiate and objectify the world (Esland, 1971). My curriculum was constrained by my assumptions about what constituted various subjects, by the specificity I presupposed they required, and by the definitions I presumed the institution assigned them. To a degree, I still viewed the subjects as separate things, as the knowledge itself, instead of as sources of inquiry (Dewey, 1916). Even in encouraging the students to be self-directed learners, books were emphasized as compilations of facts to extract, not as multiple sources for constructing your own meanings. The enacted curriculum continued to reflect my own contradictory stance between an objectivistic view and a constructivist view of knowledge.

Students' Relationship with Knowledge

Interacting with my conceptions of knowledge were the roles I negotiated with students in the process of making them stakeholders in the instructional conversation. Three perspectives on knowledge became apparent in the roles students took (see figure 3). Students viewed knowledge passively in their role as apprentice learners (Brown, 1990). "Sitting at the master's feet", students were active in their engagement with the knowledge shared, yet passive in their relationship with that knowledge. Knowledge was something to be understood and accepted, not something to be questioned and reinterpreted. There seemed to be a relationship between the nature of knowledge and the approaches one could take to share that knowledge. Some forms of knowledge in the classroom promoted this passive relationship, where students developed as spectators of knowledge. Students still actively interpreted the knowledge through their prior experiences, making their developing understanding a part of themselves. But the student was not the decision-maker here.

The power of story worked within this passive relationship to knowledge. Students could see knowledge as real, connected in multiple ways to their own experiences and creations. The whole child was emersed in literature, as they experienced the tribulations of the characters in the book, related it to their own experiences, and created new meanings from it. Students were able to construct deeper understandings of other cultures, historical periods, and human themes through their active negotiation with the teacher. This knowledge was to be incorporated and accepted by the learner, not questioned or altered.

An active relationship with knowledge came about when students were able to question knowledge, making decisions about validity and importance. Questioning knowledge,

inquiring into the meanings behind the facts, was part of the enterprise which I began to see as primary in my classroom.

> This is exactly the type of relationship to knowledge which I am interested in promoting. I must see "thematic" pale in comparison to "inquiry" as the focus for the relationship to knowledge. Themes might promote curriculum which pushes us to inquire, but by no means will that necessarily happen. Projects push kids more in that direction. I've seen that this week as kids report to the class on their planet posters. As kids take on the role of producer of knowledge, knowledge which they have researched and selected, they identify themself with that knowledge. It becomes theirs. They are a mini-expert, standing in front of the class telling what they know, proud of their accomplishment and of "their" planet. (Teacher Journal, 1/18/92).

This personal connection to knowledge, this process of becoming experts, became the opening for inquiry. Expertise involves converting declarative knowledge of what into procedural knowledge of how (Anderson, 1985). Students as experts had to translate the factual knowledge they had investigated into structures for representing that knowledge in ways understandable by their peers.

> I have been especially impressed in the detail about explorers lives which has been talked about. Many presenters gave sketches of explorers lives which made them seem real and human, telling about their childhoods and revealing some of their motivations for exploring. ... I have tried to share the stage with the presenter. They are in the front of the class, giving their report, calling on students, and responding to requests for clarity and comprehensibility from their peers. ... From my position at the back of the classroom, I become an incisive questioner and critic, trying to push for deeper meaning by the presenter, pushing for more details, as well as revealing parts of the story which might be neglected by the presenter. (Teacher Journal, 2/15/92)

The roles and expectations of the teacher seem key here. I became more the leader and organizer of questioning, modeling for all a critical attitude toward knowledge and its sources. The students, while being accountable for the knowledge shared, also were encouraged to become critical questioners themselves, to move the discussions in the directions of their own interests. We were redefining knowledge in the classroom. It was no longer expected that solely I would dispense knowledge, but instead that all would share of their knowledge. It was no longer accepted that knowledge was not to be questioned, but instead knowledge was open to all to interpret and critique. The students began to demand their active role in the negotiation and construction of knowledge in the classroom, sharing my stage as teachers and as learners.

> The kids kept asking me when they would get to present their state reports to the class. They demanded the opportunity to teach the class what they have learned, to make that knowledge public . . . . I see such a difference in how they present now from the beginning of the year. ... But most impressive is their attitude toward the knowledge they have gained. They show real pride in their knowledge, a real awareness of themselves as expert in this particular area with something to share with the class. They seem to be more

> teachers, taking the role seriously and with a sense of direction. They welcome questions from the class, and see their role in a highly positive light. This was my aim, to create that sense of authorship of knowledge, where each had their role to contribute to the knowledge base of the whole . . . . (Teacher Journal, 4/12/92).

Students also took a communal approach to knowledge, relating to knowledge as part of a community of learners. Learning was redefined as having a purpose beyond the self. A developing ethic required the sharing of expertise with the community, where the group could jointly construct meaning from one's growing expertise. Within the group, students were teachers, questioners, experts. The teacher was protagonist, moving from questioner to teacher to learner, both physically and intellectually. The group aided each other in the process of transforming information into knowledge, together constructing knowledge in an atmosphere consistent with a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Joint problem-solving actively involved students in a social transaction, allowing students to do collaboratively what they were not yet ready to do alone. In our group work existed the type of collaboration that involved all in hard thinking, not for me but for themselves.

As the year progressed, the group became more able to carry on this instructional conversation, where all were involved in defining knowledge for themselves and for the group. We were able to move back and forth from our school study to the events in the world around the students. The lines between school knowledge and personal knowledge were able to fall away as students became stakeholders in knowledge negotiation and creation. Knowledge needs to be alive to be negotiated. In the excitement of the quest for understanding the events in the world around us was found the stakes in that knowledge. Our communal conversations were then able to mediate school knowledge with personal knowledge.

What Now?

My definition of theme study evolved as I enacted the curriculum in the classroom. I struggled between the disciplines defining the content of schooling and student experience, the teacher, and the materials defining what would happen in my classroom. In emphasizing themes, powerful connections were allowed to surface, revealing crosscutting ideas which disclosed fundamental patterns. A climate of open inquiry seemed to make this possible, as we together shared the purpose of understanding the world around us.

I came to a deeper understanding of the dilemmas facing me as a classroom teacher. Although I approached knowledge in the classroom from a decidedly constructivist perspective, I continued to grapple with the forces, both internal and external, impinging on my ability to implement that view. The stance of the students toward knowledge in the classroom became a primary concern, as I saw movement from a more passive relationship with knowledge toward an active and communal approach. Creating true instructional conversations, where students identified themselves as stakeholders in the process of learning, appeared to be a key aspect of practice which allowed us to explore more active relationships to knowledge.

The insights derived from my struggles in the classroom should be useful for those developing both curriculum and theory. The teacher must be seen as an independent actor in the implementation of curricula. My attempt to enact theme study curriculum in my classroom reveals the complexities involved in the teacher's role as curriculum maker. Teachers are by no means autonomous, working under constraints at multiple levels. Stories of practice disclose what is possible as we attempt to re-empower teachers. Change is difficult within any institution, as I found even within a progressive school. These are important stories to share, stories that can enlighten the intersection of theory and practice. In looking at and discussing new ways of thinking and teaching, teachers can begin to grapple with the transformations of ideas and behavior required in becoming change agents (Darling-Hammond, 1990).

This study is, more than anything else, the story of one classroom, one teacher, one group of children. It is a story centered in one teacher's perspective more than in the perspectives of the students. By no means does it apply across various contexts. Its purpose is more to raise questions than to provide answers. This study provides one view of the many that are necessary to help both teachers and researchers understand what is possible in school classrooms. It points to the need for multiple voices to be heard, combining views from both inside and outside the classroom, from both student and teacher, from both the involved and the detached. In raising the issue of both the teacher's and the students' relationship to knowledge, we can begin to see what is possible in the classroom. There is much more research needed to broaden our understanding of this complex area. I hope the perspectives of teachers, through their own action research, will be a part of this effort.

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Year Calendar for my Fifth-grade Classroom

Theme	Month	Social Studies	Science	Literature	Writing	Events	Mathematics
Why are we here	Aug.& Sept.	Geography Flight simulation	Geology research	*Call it Courage* *Bridge to Terabithia*	Adventure	Airport	Numeration Scale maps Add/Subtraction
	Oct.				Horror	NASA demonstration	Decimals
Understand differences	Nov.	Indians research	teach activities	*Double Life of Pocahontas*	Newspaper	Unicef Festival Conferences	Multiplication
	Dec.	presentations display	evaluation Astronomy	*James & Giant Peach*		Indian sites	Division
Exploring the Unknown	Jan.	evaluation Explorers debate/research	research presentations		Poetry	Assemblies Atlanta field trip	
	Feb.	presentations Pioneers simulation	Oobleck Heat	*Caddie Woodlawn*	Dialogue Mystery		Fractions
Taking off on Investigations	Mar.	state reports maps	ice cubes			Conferences Spring program	
	Apr.	presentations Civil War	conduction experiments	*Slave Dancer*	Kid's books Storytelling	County library	Decimal mult. & div
Greed and Charity: Why people act as they do.	May & June	research auction presentations	heat/temp	*Roots*		CTBS tests Dance perf. Assembly Coast field trip	Business Simulation

FIGURE 1

Evolution of Student Research Opportunities

Content	Learning Arrangement	Teaching Context
Geology questions	Cross-grade research & learning groups, create teaching texts	Individuals teach small group with text
Native American groups	Individuals research, complete chart, create artifact	Groups teach class, class fills charts
Astronomical objects	Individuals research, create poster & brochure	Individuals teach class, class creates books
Early explorers of America	Individuals research, groups collaborate, prepare notes	Individuals interviewed by class while fill charts
States of U.S.	Individuals research, write report & poster, group edits	Individuals teach class, class takes notes
Civil War	Group or individual research, prepare notes	Group or individuals teach class, class takes notes

FIGURE 2

Conceptions of Knowledge

Teacher's Stance Toward Knowledge

1. Self as Knower: Belief vs Action

2. Student as Knower/Learner:
   Promoting construction

3. Knowledge of Discipline:
   Contradictory demands

Student's Relationship with Knowledge

1. Passive: Apprentice Learners

2. Active: Experts/ Questioners

3. Communal: Community of Learners

FIGURE 3